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ABSTRACT

Changes in the demographics of the student population, the political climate, the economic health of California and the nation, and the availability of public support services have contributed to an emerging climate of violence as a means of problem solving or as a consequence of frustration. Community college faculty and staff may protect their students and themselves by understanding and recognizing the perspectives of students and adopting intervention approaches that emphasize communication skills and conflict resolution techniques rather than authoritative force. Effective conflict resolution involves active listening and an understanding of legal, personal, and institutional rights and responsibilities. Community college faculty are in a unique position to explore innovative approaches to conflict resolution, such as the introduction of collaborative learning in the classroom. Faculty and staff must develop skills that encompass direct, assertive expression, effective listening, awareness of non-verbal communication, accurate descriptions of behavior, and accurate assessments of one's own perceptions. Possible approaches for faculty and staff development in the area of conflict resolution include offering training seminars, creating and disseminating materials and resources on conflict resolution, establishing an emergency crisis team, integrating conflict resolution in the curriculum, and promoting campus safety. Finally, clear student discipline policies identifying the expected standard of student conduct should exist and be enforced. (TGI)

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TOWARD A NONVIOLENT CAMPUS CLIMATE: CONFLICT RESOLUTION

THE ACADEMIC SENATE
FOR CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES
Adopted Spring 1996

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TOWARD A NONVIOLENT CAMPUS CLIMATE: CONFLICT RESOLUTION
1995 - 1996

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Abstract

Changes in the demographics of the student population, the political climate, the economic health of the state and the nation, and the availability of public support services have contributed to an emerging climate of violence as a means of problem solving or as a consequence of frustration. Compounding the situation is the emergence of major public policy issues that address the basic rights of person-hood that do not enjoy deliberative analysis and thorough consideration.

Students of the California Community Colleges experience the aforementioned hardships; consequently signs of disenfranchisement appear in the lack of retention or persistence and unmet educational goals. Faculty and staff recognize that students have prevailing perceptions including skepticism, suspicion, and disrespect toward authority. These perceptions combined with unresolved negative attitudes in increasingly tense classroom situations might result in the faculty's fear and lack of confidence in his or her ability to protect their students and themselves.

This paper offers communication and intervention skills for the faculty to use to avoid an escalating conflict and its consequences. It is an approach that is not centered upon a framework of authoritative force; instead it emphasizes communication skills and the faculty's ability to employ techniques that disengage and de-escalate potentially dangerous situations.

This paper is written in response to Resolution F94-13.1.0 "Campus Violence" which was passed by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges at the Fall 1994 Plenary Session. The resolution reads:

"Whereas in a series of 1993 Spring Session resolutions, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges expressed concern about violence on community college campuses and made recommendations to local senates on this issue, and

Whereas there continues to be concern about violence and hostile climate on California Community College campuses, therefore

Be it resolved that the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges recommend to local senates that conflict resolution be part of curricular offerings and faculty development, and

Be it further Resolved that the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges consider development of model curriculum for conflict resolution, and

Be it finally resolved that the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges develop a background paper and make recommendations on the faculty role in the development and maintenance of an emotionally supportive campus climate."

"The one thing that has become clearer to me in the course of my life is that keeping an open mind is of utmost importance. The right kind of openness is the most precious human possession..... We need to take a firm stand, but we also need to feel that we have not thus put our feet in shackles. Wherever we stand, we should stand free and unbiased and grow aware of the world." Martin Buber

Over the last two decades, there has been a dramatic demographic shift from a homogeneous student population to one that is characterized by multiple forms of diversity. The diversity of gender, age, race and ability has created both a challenge and an opportunity for our community colleges. Coupled with this rich diversity are a number of economic factors including the continued California recession, intense job competition, the loss of public agencies and support services, an erosion of income and inadequate housing. All have contributed to an emerging climate of violence as a means of problem solving or as a consequence of frustrations.

The political climate of the state could serve as an indication that the voting population is willing to assess blame on particular groups of people or particular public policies for contributing to the decline in the problems of economy, climate, and overall well-being of the state. Consequently, issues such as basic rights of personhood (Proposition 187), diversifying the work-force and educational systems (AB211) have emerged as major public policy issues without the benefit of deliberative analysis and determination of implications on the educational systems or the state. All of these factors face the citizen/student while attempting to attain an education and participate effectively in the society.

The diversities of culture, the diversity of groups within cultures, and the assumptions and value judgments made both by the various cultures about themselves and about others are matched by equally judgment-laden assumptions others make about them. This mirror-within-the-mirror judgment-making results in conflict, often volatile conflict, that all too often tragically ends in violence.

The people of the state of California, like those of the entire nation, are experiencing an economic shift that continues to affect health care, job security, public services, retirement, and education. Fees for students are prohibiting more and more economically marginal populations from becoming students. The downsizing of the work-force results in more families who are struggling to survive and who often cannot afford to support their children's education. At least fifty percent of the California Community Colleges students receive Board of Governors waivers and grants, indicating the fact that they currently live below the poverty level.[1] Increasingly students are having to work more hours for income to survive. Consequently, they either have difficulty finding the time and energy to study, or they determine it is impossible to work and study and ultimately decide to terminate their educational pursuits.

Much of the discussion about student retention rates has not adequately addressed the factors of economic hardship and disenfranchisement. These hardships create severe barriers to the dreams and goals of our students. Many of our students come to our community colleges expecting to succeed and expecting to have their education provide easy answers to complex societal problems, not the least of which is the systematic disenfranchisement of entire populations.

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[1]California Community Colleges, Board of Governors Report, March 1994

Additionally, faculty and staff recognize that many students have prevailing perceptions including skepticism, suspicion, and disrespect toward authority. Unresolved negative attitudes, conflicting encounters and tense classroom situations might result in the faculty's fear and lack of confidence in their ability to protect their students and themselves.

The cynicism and nihilism felt by many in our society is exhibited in on-campus behavior. There is a lack of focus, a growing disdain for courtesy, manners, and civility. Our campuses are regularly tagged with graffiti. Our campuses are increasingly composed of groups who have little awareness of the values and customs of other groups. Our student populations are often competing for seats in over crowded classrooms. Their personal problems erode their ability to learn, thus compounding their frustrations.

There is a need for a conversion from cynicism and nihilism to a sense of tragedy that is defined as some sense of possibility that could lead to hope. This hope could then motivate us to seek solutions when it seems futile to do so. Cornell West states "The reason that I am preoccupied with a sense of the tragic is that I am preoccupied with our moment in which we must look defeat, disillusionment and discouragement in the face and work through it. A sense of the tragic is an attempt to keep alive some sense of possibility. Some sense of hope. Some sense of agency. Some sense of resistance in a moment of defeat and disillusionment and a moment of discouragement."[2]

An attempt to understand and recognize the perspectives of students could motivate faculty to acquire the will and the teaching tools which acknowledge and respect the diverse learning communication styles, problem solving mechanisms and fiscal resources of their

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[2]Cornell West, Prophetic Thought in Post-modern Times, (1994) p 32

students. This acknowledgment and respect could better equip faculty to identify aspects of their own behavior, skills, teaching styles and attitudes that may contribute to rising tensions. Attitudes and styles which encourage critical discourse and foster a respect for the right of individuals to think differently support the enormous influence education has on the well being of a democratic society.

Dr. Cornell West states "Education must not be a cathartic quest for identity. It must foster credible sensibilities for an active critical citizenry."[3] Commonly, conflict is associated with negative concepts such as destructiveness, antagonism, uncomfortable relationships, loss of jobs, broken families, violence, and war. The consequence of this human reaction is the avoidance of conflict and a paradoxical condition whereby the avoided conflict grows to destructive proportions.[4] Because conflicts may become destructive if they are not addressed, outbursts, and verbal, emotional, and physical abuse often result from many small, unobserved and unattended issues. If the minor unnoticed conflicts are confronted as they occur, then the climate of calm and secure discourse can be maintained.

Communication and intervention skills are also key components in avoiding or resolving conflict and diffusing rage before violence occurs. Knowing how to quickly tailor intervention techniques into effective diffusion strategy during a rapidly escalating situation can be a determining factor as to whether there will be a successful resolution of the situation and the absence of any form of violence.

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[3] Prophetic Thought in Post-modern Times, p 19

[4] Richard Mayer, Conflict Management: The Courage to Confront, (1995) p3

An under-utilized technique for avoiding conflict is active listening.[5] Listening facilitates effective communication which affects understanding. Unconditional listening is a major source of comfort and therefore an essential and effective conflict resolution tool.[6] A good listener makes no judgment and is not planning a retort while engaged in the listening process.

Finally, conflict resolution in the community colleges necessitates an understanding of legal, personal, and institutional rights and responsibilities. Equally compelling is the need to understand the system-wide and local policies and procedures which dictate the limits of our behaviors in regards to those rights. An example includes a faculty member understanding the appropriate processes for removing a disruptive student and the student understanding his or her rights in that regard. The absence of that understanding at an emotionally intense time of conflict may precipitate both the faculty and the student to exceed their limitations and ultimately result in some form of violence.

Community college faculty are in a unique position to address innovative and effective ways to deal with the resolution of conflict. The close faculty to student relations, typically a characteristic of community colleges, create opportunities less available in the senior institutions of higher education. Additionally, the academic freedom to implement various teaching strategies creates opportunities to address student frustration and success. One example is the issue of collaborative learning versus competitive learning. While many of our students have been raised in environments that foster and value collaboration, many faculty are more comfortable with a classroom designed with the traditional lecture format, individual

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[5] Conflict Management: The Courage to Confront, p?

[6] Conflict Management: The Courage to Confront, p?

assignments and examinations where collaboration is considered cheating, and competitive grading practices.

How well we are equipped to recognize and handle conflict may impact campus climate and safety. Developing the following skills might assist faculty in dealing with conflict and its consequences:

a. the ability to assess the level of danger and the potential danger in a given situation
b. the ability of faculty to use their influence and power (formal and informal) positively and effectively
c. the ability to disengage ego-protecting behaviors in the face of personal verbal attacks
d. the ability to effectively and actively listen
e. the ability to be candid and direct when appropriate in conflict resolution and the ability to discern its appropriateness
f. an awareness of non-verbal communication
g. the ability to recognize one's limitation and know when to request assistance
h. the ability to facilitate the investment of each student in the class, recognizing that their perspective adds an important component to the group dynamics.
I. collaborative skills including knowledge of the consensus process, engaging participation of all, providing diverse environments for diverse learning styles, and establishing mutually agreed upon expectations.
j. the ability to distinguish between isolated individual disruptive behavior and group dynamics which may be manifested in the observed behavior of an individual student.

These skills encompass direct, assertive expression, effective listening, accurate descriptions of behavior and accurate assessment of perception. As may be evident, conflict resolution is an artful activity that requires training and practice. To that end, the implications for faculty and staff development are great. Possible approaches are to:

a. invite and/or hire professionals with the expertise in the management of conflict to conduct workshops and training seminars for faculty, staff, and students.
b. focus on the issue of conflict resolution by making it a theme of an all faculty convocation.
c. support faculty and staff development attempts to acquire training in conflict resolution.
d. sponsor colloquia which might "train the trainer" in techniques in conflict resolution.

e. publish and disseminate materials on conflict resolution to the college community.
f. create and disseminate a list of possible resources for training in conflict resolution
g. create and disseminate bibliographies of books, articles, pamphlets, video and audio cassettes on the topic of conflict resolution.
h. create an emergency/crisis response team utilizing the discipline experts in the counseling, social science, and health areas of the campus who are trained in conflict resolution.
I. consider the benefit of conflict resolution education curriculum requirements or electives.
j. consider the benefit of cultural breath requirements in the curriculum.
k. provide needed administrative and institutional resources to maintain a safe campus environment in which teaching and learning can occur.

A growing body of work addresses the various types of disruptive behavior and the appropriate institutional and faculty response. Disruptive behavior ranging from nuisance type behavior to physical aggression occurs. Faculty should be familiar with the limitations of their ability to address the behaviors. Concurrently, the institution has a responsibility to be able to address the situations which result from behaviors that extend beyond the limitations of the faculty's ability.

Some institutions have Crisis Intervention Teams in place for the purpose of addressing physically aggressive and continuing nuisance behaviors, as well as psychological and medical emergencies. The teams are usually multi-disciplinary and include appropriate faculty and staff. The key to the effectiveness of the teams is their ability to anticipate situations, respond immediately to the referral, follow up with the referral, and provide ongoing training for faculty and staff throughout the institution.

Education codes and regulations exist relating to the exercise of free expression by students upon the premises of community colleges. The colleges and districts have a responsibility to make reasonable provisions for the time, place, and manner of conducting such

freedom of expression. The language of the codes and regulations is prescriptive in nature and would "...prohibit the local governing boards from denying the students the right to use bulletin boards, petitions, buttons, badges, or other insignia except that expression which is obscene, libelous, or slanderous according to current legal standards, or which so incites students as to create a clear and present danger of the commission of unlawful acts on the community college premises, or the violation of lawful community college regulations, or the substantial disruption of the order of the community college...."[7]

Other regulations and codes exist to address sexual harassment as a form of speech or action. The Education Code defines sexual harassment as "...unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors, and other verbal, visual, or physical conduct of a sexual nature, made by someone from or in the work or educational setting...."[8] Specific conditions are identified along with requirements for the institution to have a written policy on sexual harassment which includes information on where and how to report charges of sexual harassment.

Clear student discipline policies which identify the expected standard of student conduct commensurate with maintaining academic and social levels of higher educations should exist and be enforced.

Mayers (1995) states "Well managed conflict is a key to creativity, communication, and goal achievement. It is required for the establishment and maintenance of trust, which is both the glue that holds teams together and the oil that facilitates their functioning."[9] By addressing

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[7]Education Code, Section 76120

[8]Education Code, Section 212.5

[9]Conflict Management: The Courage to Confront, p80

these issues, we can create a safe and productive learning environment, especially as we continue to use innovative learning based models to supplement more traditional modes of teaching and learning. Education requires the building of trust and mutual respect. Conflict resolution can promote a positive classroom and campus climate in which teaching and learning can flourish. This positive environment and climate enables faculty and students to use education to address the complex issues in our diverse society.